

The Affects of World War I on  
Sweet Briar College

Drew Hardy  
Mr. Berg  
February 21, 1985

The changes at Sweet Briar College, during and after World War I, suggest a change in the attitude of the world both inside and outside of Sweet Briar towards women and their education. Is it possible that after seeing how important women were to the war effort, the world was starting to realize the importance of educating women? By presenting examples of changes between 1910 and 1920 at Sweet Briar College, I will attempt to prove that these changes were, in part, a result of World War I.

Sweet Briar College began accepting students in 1906. At its opening, the courses offered at Sweet Briar were very limited. During this time the curriculum consisted of the basics, such as; English, history, mathematics, Latin, and other languages.<sup>1</sup> The college itself, consisted of three types of students: those preparing for college - called pre-freshmen, those that were actually college students, and those who were called Special Students.<sup>2</sup> The students preparing for college were part of what was called the Sweet Briar Academy. The Academy was roughly equivalent to what we consider to be a preparatory school or working on post graduate studies at a high school. The Special Students were students who had no major nor any particular course of study. These students were using Sweet Briar as a type of 'finishing school'. The main goal of the Special Students seemed to be the pursuit of an eligible prospect for marriage.

Sweet Briar College opened at a time when a college education for women was not taken very seriously. Higher education for women was considered to be frivolous and an unnecessary extravagance. Many people considered a women's college as merely a convenient place to cultivate eligible candidates for marriage. The period of time before World War I was a time during which there was ". . . a storm of protest against colleges throughout the entire nation, and especially against higher education for women."<sup>3</sup> This statement describes one of the most difficult obstacles Sweet Briar College had to overcome.

Unfortunately, it was sometimes the colleges themselves that unknowingly kept this false image of a womens college alive. There were more than a few aspects of Sweet Briar that helped keep alive its 'finishing school' image. One such aspect was the history Sweet Briar presented of itself. In the prologue to the Sweet Briar College Catalogues, from 1906 to 1918, the following passage is included in the history of Sweet Briar:

"(Sweet Briar College) standing for a policy and work distinctly and particularly its own will offer to the young women of the South carefully formulated courses of study, leading to degrees, of high grade and proper adaption to the needs and capabilities of the female mind - some literary and some scientific . . ."<sup>4</sup>

This quote leads one to believe that even the college itself, felt that women were not capable of handling academics seriously. After 1918 the college catalogues refrain from offering a history of the school. In place of the history they presented the readers with a brief summation of the founding of the college and the reasons behind the founding of the college. When the college

resumed printing its history in 1934, the wording of the history was decidedly different from the wording of the previous history.<sup>5</sup> The revised history does not limit its desired students to "the young women of the South."<sup>6</sup> The college, wisely, leaves out any type of reference to the "needs and capabilities of the female mind."<sup>7</sup> The changing versions of Sweet Briar history suggest a change in the way the faculty and administration were viewing their students and prospective students. Could it be that the importance of women in World War I was making people realize that women were capable of more than previously assumed? Were educators realizing the potential of an educated women?

It wasn't just the world outside of Sweet Briar that was beginning to see women's education in a new light. The students and faculty at Sweet Briar were also changing. The students were starting to question values and traditions, that previously were taken for granted. Some good examples of the students changing attitudes can be seen in the Sweet Briar Magazine, published by the students. The magazines contain records of debates over such subjects as womens suffrage. On February 4, 1911, the sophomore class held a debate. The subject was, "Resolved - that women should have the right to vote."<sup>8</sup> There were also some interesting stories included in this magazine, such as: "Matrimony versus higher education."<sup>9</sup> It is apparent that women were beginning to view themselves and their educations with more importance. An editorial in the April 1914 edition of the Sweet Briar Magazine, states that when a woman has an education

". . . one might say that she has been inoculated against boredom for the rest of her life."<sup>10</sup> All these student's views and comments on life, academic and otherwise, suggest a definite shift of attitude at Sweet Briar College.

The students were not the only ones going through changes at the college. The faculty and administration were both changing also. The faculty was starting to demand more from the administration. The majority of the faculty's demands centered around the adjustments needed in the curriculum. The professors wanted new departments of physics, social sciences, education, and physical education. They also wanted new courses in physiology, english and French history, and advanced courses in Spanish, economics and psychology.<sup>11</sup> The college was now beginning to offer courses that would help women in places other than the home. An example of these new courses is the offering of Commercial Advertising.<sup>12</sup> The administration itself was also making demands. In a May 8, 1917 meeting of the Executive Committee, "The president announced that she had presented to the Board of Trustees a plan to have Sweet Briar made the State College for Women, co-ordinated with the University of Virginia . . . ."<sup>13</sup> Although the Board approved the plan, it was never set into motion. Another change at Sweet Briar was the degree offered. When Sweet Briar began, the only degree they offered was the Bachelor of Arts degree. The year of 1917 brought to Sweet Briar, the Bachelor of Science degree.<sup>14</sup> The offering of a degree in the sciences was a big step forward in womens education. Women now had the incentive to explore fields of study otherwise left to men.



The academic year of 1916 and 1917 seemed to be a major turning point in the history of Sweet Briar College. Many changes were made and many milestones were established. Mrs. Emily Watts McVea took over for Miss Mary K. Benedict as president of the college. Sweet Briar became more aware of the need for honor among the students, and as a result the Sweet Briar College Catalogue now contained the following passage:

"The honor system obtains at the college and all tests and examinations are given under this system. Any violation of its requirements constitutes an offense of great seriousness."<sup>15</sup>

This was the first mention of any type of Honor System in the catalogues. If the school was taking the Honor System more seriously now, maybe this indicates that students were taking academics and their education more seriously. The college wanted prospective students to realize the high moral standards that embodied Sweet Briar College. A look at the lectures offered at Sweet Briar during 1916 and 1917 may also suggest a change in the way students viewed academics and the world around them. "Professor Charles Zublin spoke on 'The United States, pace-maker or peace-maker'" and "Dr. Raymond Beasley spoke on his 'Experiences in an English War Hospital.'"<sup>16</sup> Offering lectures of this caliber suggests that Sweet Briar students were becoming more interested and concerned with the world around them. The years 1916-1917 also brought one low point to Sweet Briar - enrollment. The total enrollment for this period of time was 117 students, and all time low for the college. It seems that the war affected Sweet Briar in this (enrollment) aspect also. For either personal or financial reasons, many students were refraining from attending college.

The next years, 1917-1918, brought still more changes to Sweet Briar. It seemed that President McVea was determined to live up to the previous president's accomplishments. In many ways President McVea surpassed ex-president Benedict's accomplishments. The second year of her presidency brought something entirely new to Sweet Briar. "In accordance with the wish of the founder of the college, Mrs. Indiana Fletcher Williams, 10 scholarships . . . are given on the recommendation of the President to such applicants as are deemed worthy."<sup>17</sup> The offering of scholarships by the college was something entirely new to Sweet Briar. Previously it seemed that Sweet Briar felt that if a student couldn't afford a Sweet Briar education, than she was not worthy of a Sweet Briar education. It seems that ". . . proceeds from the Tea Room and the Book Shop had been invested and the interest. . . ." was being used to help fund the scholarships.<sup>18</sup> The college was also offering " a few remunerative positions in the college for students desiring such opportunities."<sup>19</sup> This was also the first time that Sweet Briar offered any type of paying jobs to students. The idea of a woman working, let alone working to pay for her education, was an entirely revolutionary one. With more and more women in the job market, Sweet Briar was keeping up with the times by offering students jobs. President McVea believed in helping the war effort in any way possible and thus a ". . . committee was appointed to discuss the mobilization of the students to some form of war service . . ."<sup>20</sup> Although the war was reaching its peak, as far as United States involvement was concerned, more students were attending college. The increase

schools and for the maintenance upon them . . . ."24 This letter is a definite indication of the changing views about women and their education. By including this statement in the College Catalogues, Sweet Briar was expressing their opinion that the college was equal to any other college in the nation. Sweet Briar was also viewing itself with more importance in other ways. 1919 was the year that the following statement appeared: "By action of the Board of Directors, Sweet Briar Academy has been discontinued. Only college students are now received."25 By eliminating the Academy, the college itself was moving away from the stereotypical image of a womens college being merely a 'finishing school'. This move was a major step in Sweet Briar's growing independence from the stigma of a girls school. Sweet Briar was now without question, a Womens College. Enrollment was another milestone for Sweet Briar during 1919-1920. The enrollment reached an all time high of 253 students. With such a growth in enrollment, it is evident that a women's education was now something to be taken seriously.

Between the years of 1910 and 1920, Sweet Briar evolved into a full-fledged college. Gone were the Academy and the Special Students. In their place were women who were serious about their education. These were a new type of women. They had experienced the effects of a major war and learned of their importance from it. These women were learning that they were just as capable as any man. The college (Sweet Briar) some of these women chose to attend, was one that had also seen the effects of the war. Sweet Briar realized the potential of these women and the importance



in enrollment at Sweet Briar was small, but encouraging.

The next two academic years, 1918-1920, showed remodeling in every aspect, from curriculum to enrollment. The year of 1918 saw Sweet Briar College considering the advantages and disadvantages of offering pre-nursing courses.<sup>21</sup> The offering of pre-nursing courses show that World War I had even managed to reach the curriculum at Sweet Briar. By offering lectures such as: "women and war work" and "America and Foreign Relations"<sup>22</sup> it seems that the faculty and administration wanted to be sure that their students were knowledgeable about current events. The war seemed to be a turning point for Sweet Briar College. The faculty and administration came to realize how important it was to keep their students informed about the world outside of Sweet Briar. After the war, Sweet Briar continued to keep its students informed, especially through lectures with topics relevant to current events. During the fall of 1919, the college had the Hon. Walter M. Chandler speak on "The Great War and its aftermath" and Dr. Ida H. Ogilvie speak on "The Women's Land Army."<sup>23</sup> These were two topics that were definitely relevant to the period of time after World War I. Again Sweet Briar was keeping its students well-informed. Another example of changes at Sweet Briar College can be seen in the opening statement of the 1919-1920 Sweet Briar College Catalogue. This statement was actually an excerpt from a letter written to the college by Woodrow Wilson. In this letter President Wilson says, " I approve most heartily your plans for making through the Bureau of Education a comprehensive campaign for the support of the

of educating them. Not all the changes at Sweet Briar were because of the war, but the majority of them were caused directly or indirectly by the effects of World War I. If one were to comment on the beneficial effects of World War I, the strengthening of the educational system for women and their colleges would definitely have to be included. Sweet Briar College is a prime example of a women's college that was strengthened, in part, by World War I.

David C. Hardy  
"I pledge ..."

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogues, 1906-1911.
- <sup>2</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogues, 1906-1911.
- <sup>3</sup>Sweet Briar Magazine, Vol.ii, No.1, Dec. 1910, p.58.
- <sup>4</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogues, 1906-1911, 1911-1918.
- <sup>5</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogues, The history of Sweet Briar,1934.
- <sup>6</sup>Refer to note #4.
- <sup>7</sup>Refer to note #4.
- <sup>8</sup>Sweet Briar Magazine, Feb. 1911, Vol ii, no.2, p.153.
- <sup>9</sup>Sweet Briar Magazine, April 1911, Vol. ii, no.3, p. 202.
- <sup>10</sup>Sweet Briar Magazine, April 1914, Vol. v, no.3, p.111.
- <sup>11</sup>Executive Committee Meeting, minutes of. May 8, 1917.
- <sup>12</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1917.
- <sup>13</sup>Executive Committee Meeting, minutes of. May 8, 1917.
- <sup>14</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogues, 1917.
- <sup>15</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1916-1917, p.71.
- <sup>16</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1916-1917, p.64.
- <sup>17</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1917-1918, p. 68.
- <sup>18</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1917-1918, p.68.
- <sup>19</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1917-1918,p. 68.
- <sup>20</sup>Faculty Meeting, minutes of. Nov. 6, 1918.
- <sup>21</sup>Faculty Meeting, minutes of. Sept. 7, 1917.
- <sup>22</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1918-1919, p.66.
- <sup>23</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1919-1920, p. 68.
- <sup>24</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1919-1920, p.2.
- <sup>25</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1919-1920. p.77.

## Annotated Bibliography

Faculty Minutes 1910-1923. They are found in room #1 of the Sweet Briar archives. They are located on the right side of the room, in the second set of shelves. These are a record of everything that went on at faculty and executive meetings. They aren't very helpful. Much of the minutes during this time are just records of students petitioning to add or drop courses. There is some information on changing freshmen requirements and wording of the Honor Code.

Sweet Briar College Catalogues 1909-1920. They are found in room #2 of the archives. They are located on the left side of the room, in the second set of shelves. The catalogues contain the courses of instruction offered at Sweet Briar. They contain a history of the college, the members of the faculty, and the members of the administration. This is a good source for someone studying the curriculum, the increasing faculty or the requirements of the college.

Sweet Briar Magazine 1910-1920. They are found in room #2 of the archives. They are located on the left side of the room, in the first set of shelves. This is a literary magazine put out by the students for the faculty and students of the college. The magazine contains short stories, poems, and essays all written by students. It also contains a section for editorials, college topics, and criticisms of other college magazines. The editorials are very helpful in determining what students at a particular time felt controversial.